



This is Anthony Byrnes *Opening the Curtain on LA Theater* for KCRW.

Against the fluid and all too inconstant backdrop that is Los Angeles theater, there's something reassuring about going to see a Murray Mednick play.

It's not that you know what you're going to get - his plays are too varied for that - but there's a consistency, an almost relentlessness, to his writing. I imagine that Mr. Mednick is always writing . . . and remarkably, through his company [Padua Playwrights](#), he's *always* producing those plays. There's a workman like dedication. I'm reminded of that great scene in the film *Pollock* where Ed Harris gets up on a freezing morning, wordlessly grabs a cup of coffee, and then goes to work - goes to work making art. It's a commitment from a different time.

In Mr. Mednick's latest play [Villon](#) he's turned his sights on another artist, the 15th century French poet François Villon.

The play chronicles the poet's life from the hard scrabble childhood poverty of a street urchin, to being improbably adopted by a man of letters, taught Latin and sent to get a Master's degree at the University of Paris. The play is really a loose biography about - *no, it isn't*. It's a formal experiment with characters constantly breaking the scene and commenting on the action. Actors giving other actors direction, not only referencing the audience but noting how we probably can't follow the story so they'll make it simpler. It's really a meta-theatrical play on form and...

Wait, it's a philosophical exploration of the nature of writing, mortality, and morality. Mr. Mednick departs from both the narrative and the form to explore what makes us write in the first place.

*You still with me?* Okay, that gives you a little sense of the formal tightwire act that Mr. Mednick is engaged in.

It's easy to see what attracted Mr. Mednick to Villon as a historical muse. For starters, Villon is far from the staid notion of a poet. Not only a product of poverty and the streets, Villon is a misshapen, crooked man who carries a dagger and cudgel - and is not afraid to use them. He's sort of a poetic bad ass.

Now while on the surface the play is about Francois Villon, he's more of a departure point than a destination. Here's a quick description, from that definitive source, Wikipedia:

Villon was a great innovator in terms of the themes of poetry and, through these themes, a great renovator of the forms. He understood perfectly the medieval courtly ideal, but he often chose to write against the grain, reversing the values and celebrating the lowlifes destined for the gallows, falling happily into parody or lewd jokes.

That description could just as easily fit Murray Mednick and I'm sure that's part of the attraction.

As a play, *Villon* doesn't completely hang together. When we reach the "dénouement" things unravel a bit too much and both the narrative drive and the formal experimentation seem to run out of steam. But from start to finish the thing holding the piece together is the taut acting. As always, Mr. Mednick's writing attracts wonderful actors who, like him, are in it for the long haul. It's reassuring to witness that artistic commitment.

*Villon* plays at the [Odyssey Theater](#) in West LA through March 23.

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Run Time: 90 minutes without an intermission.

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Banner image: Kevin Weisman and Alana Dietze in *Villon*. Photo by Miki Turner

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